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Frei, D (2007). Challenging Heterosexism from the Other Point of View. Representations of Homosexuality in Present-Day Television Series. Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde, 103(1):83-103.

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Originally published at:
Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde 2007, 103(1):83-103.

Challenging Heterosexism from the *Other* Point of View

Representations of Homosexuality in Present-Day Television Series*

Dana Frei

Abstract

Sex sells – darüber ist sich die Unterhaltungsindustrie der westlichen Hemisphäre einig. Immer häufiger wird Sexualität nicht nur impliziert, sondern zum Hauptthema von Filmen, Fernsehserien und anderen Unterhaltungsformen. Während bislang jedoch vor allem Heterosexualität thematisiert und repräsentiert wurde, zeigt sich in der Film- und Fernsehunterhaltung der letzten fünf bis zehn Jahren ein Wandel – mehr und mehr hat sich diese nun auch dem Thema der Homosexualität zugewandt. Zusätzlich zu den zahlreichen Fernsehserien, die hauptsächlich von heterosexuell ausgerichteten fiktionalen Welten handeln, vereinzelt jedoch auch homosexuelle Charaktere aufweisen, haben sich nun auch Formate herausgebildet und als erfolgreich erwiesen, die sich fast ausschliesslich mit Homosexualität befassen und hauptsächlich das Leben und Lieben von schwulen und lesbischen Charakteren thematisieren. Zwei dieser Formate, die aus dem angelsächsischen Raum stammen, seit einiger Zeit aber auch im deutschsprachigen Raum gesendet werden, sind *Queer as Folk* (GB: 1999–2000; USA/Kanada: 2000–2005) und *The L Word* (USA: seit 2004). Die beiden Fernsehserien erzählen auf überraschend direkte und grafische Art und Weise von einer Gruppe schwuler bzw. lesbischer Freunde. Die beiden Serien behandeln dabei auch kontroverse Themen wie Coming-Out, Diskriminierung am Arbeitsplatz und Homophobie, gleich geschlechtliche Ehen, Adoption und künstliche Befruchtung, Verhütung, Aids, Drogen, Pornographie und so weiter. Sie begleiten ihre Charaktere zudem in allen Lebenslagen und zeigen auch überraschend explizite Sexszenen gleichgeschlechtlicher Paare. Diese beiden spezifischen Serien setzen sich stärker und detaillierter mit Homosexualität und den damit verbundenen Themen auseinander als andere Formate, bei denen die Thematik vor allem humoristisch und stereotyp oder aber nur als Randthema behandelt wird. Sie eignen sich deshalb besonders gut für eine Untersuchung der Darstellung von Homosexualität.

Populäre Unterhaltungsformen können den gesellschaftlichen Diskurs über ein bestimmtes Thema mitprägen. Das Ziel des hier vorgestellten Dissertationsprojektes ist es deshalb zu untersuchen, wie die ausgewählten Serien mit dem Thema Homosexualität umgehen und welche Aspekte dabei auf welche Art und Weise dargestellt werden. Insbesondere sollen dabei folgende Arbeitshypothesen überprüft werden: 1. Die analysierten Fernsehserien stellen eine fiktionale Welt dar, in der Homosexualität die Norm ist und Heterosexualität das abweichende *Andere*, um die heteronormativen Erwartungen der Gesellschaft zu dekonstruieren und die ideologischen Annahmen dahinter in Frage zu stellen. Die Serien kehren also die Normalität der Gesellschaft um und illustrieren damit die Willkürlichkeit dieser gesellschaftlichen Normen. 2. Die Serien verwenden bestimmte rhetorische Mittel wie Parodie und Travestie, um den performativen Charakter von Geschlecht zu demaskieren und gewisse Normerwartungen der Gesellschaft zu hinterfragen. Biologisches Geschlecht ist nicht dasselbe wie Geschlechterverhalten. Letzteres ist gesellschaftlich bedingt und erlernt. Die Verwendung der erwähnten Stilmittel und die Darstellung von androgynen Charakteren unterstreichen diesen Unterschied. Ein anderes Mittel, das in den Serien verwendet wird, ist die Darstellung von frömmlichen und homophoben Charakteren, die besonders unsympathisch dargestellt werden. Die Serien verwenden also Bigotterie, um die Absurdität von Homophobie zu unterstreichen. 3. Während es den Serien durch erwähnte Methoden gelingt, gewisse Haltungen der Gesellschaft zu hinterfragen, laufen sie gleichzeitig Gefahr, einige andere Denkart zu verstärken (so beispielsweise ein Glauben an Stereotypen). Wenn in einer Serie zu sehr mit stereotypischen Attributen gearbeitet wird oder die Homogenität einer Gruppe von Menschen (z.B. «die Homosexuellen») angedeutet wird, können Stereotypen-Erwartungen verstärkt werden. Wie in den analysierten Serien mit solchen Stereotypen, Vorurteilen und Vereinheitlichungen umgegangen wird, soll im vorgestellten Projekt unter anderem untersucht werden.

More than ever before, present-day television series include gay- and lesbian-themed material and discuss sex-related issues. In addition to the numerous shows

that have begun to feature homosexual characters complementary to a mainly heterosexual world of fiction, the past few years have brought about a number of television shows which concentrate predominantly on homosexual characters and depict their lifestyles particularly as homosexuals. Series such as *Queer as Folk* (UK: 1999–2000; USA/Canada: 2000–2005) or *The L Word* (since 2004) are surprisingly frank in their depiction of homosexual lifestyles and sex as they include very controversial storylines, such as coming out, discrimination in the work place based on sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, gay adoption, artificial insemination, safe sex, HIV-positive status, drugs, internet pornography, and the like. The shows feature explicit sex scenes and reflect upon previously tabooed aspects of homosexuality in a very straightforward way. Unlike sitcoms, for example, these two particular shows offer a wider range of aspects of homosexuality and apply a graver as well as more explicit tone for their often controversially staged cogitations on homosexual issues. Moreover, they provoke controversial reactions, implying a very complex cultural impact.

In his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”¹ Louis Althusser differentiates two forms of institutions which keep societies in order – one group of *Repressive State Apparatuses* (RSAs) functioning by repression, prohibition and violence, such as the police, the army, prisons and so on, and another group of *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISAs) functioning by ideology, such as religion, school, family, politics, the media and various other forms of cultural products. Television shows and any popular forms of entertainment can be counted to these Ideological State Apparatuses; they are as such a part of social discourse influencing a society’s attitude towards a given subject. The mentioned television series, which deal so explicitly with homosexuality, are thus expected to have an ideological function in shaping people’s attitudes towards homosexuality. If such television shows are thus part of a social discourse on the subject of homosexuality, it is worth considering what ideologies they construct and what values they promote. For this reason, the aim of this project is to analyze *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in regard to the norms, values and ideologies they promote and, more specifically, the way they depict homosexual characters and lifestyles.

Queering Entertainment: *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*

Queer as Folk (UK) – the title of which refers to the British phrase “Nowt so queer as folk”, which roughly means “People are unpredictable” – depicts the lives of a group of homosexual men in Manchester and their adventures in the gay scene area around Canal Street. The three main characters are Stuart Alan Jones, an advertising executive who is very successful at seducing every sexual object he desires; his close friend Vince Tyler who is rather shy and has had a crush on his best friend Stuart for years; and Nathan Maloney, a 15-year-old boy who makes his first sexual encounter in a one-night-stand with Stuart and refuses to disappear out of his life thereafter. The show depicts (primarily male) homosexual lifestyles and sex in a very explicit way and thereby refuses to be silenced by a society trying to keep

these issues tabooed. It was praised for the way in which its main characters are presented in less stereotypical ways (i.e. presenting gay men as feminized and *camp*) than was known from previous shows and movies. Ever since the first screening of *Queer as Folk* in 1999 in Britain, the commercial success of the series has been enormous. The show has not only been adopted by other channels in addition to the original Channel 4 (a channel known for more experimental and controversial minority television) and by countries other than Britain, it was also very successful in its DVD and video sales.

Moreover, the show was adapted for the US cable channel Showtime in 2000. This American/Canadian version of *Queer as Folk* is based on the British original by R. T. Davis and takes the stories of its model further by altering some story lines and adding various new ones. As opposed to the English original, this version of the show consists of five seasons instead of only two. The main characters of *Queer as Folk* (US) are the five gay men Brian Kinney, Michael Novotny, Justin Taylor, Emmet Honeycutt and Ted Schmidt, and their lesbian friends Lindsay Peterson and Melanie Marcus. The character of Brian roughly corresponds to Stuart in the British version of the show, Michael to Vince, and Justin to Nathan. The cultural significance of both the original and the American show can be seen primarily in the breaking of barriers with their exclusively gay (and less so lesbian) focus and their sexual explicitness. When British television first launched the original show, its use of very graphic sexual scenes and its bold presentation of gay life surprised both the audience and the media.

The reactions to both versions of the show were (and still are) mixed. While the series was both heavily criticized and praised, the critics were not only found among conservative and heterosexual rounds, but also within the gay community. Some of the more positive voices praised the show for its boldness in dealing with various aspects related to the life of a homosexual person living in a predominantly heterosexual world – no matter how controversial these issues may be. Some of the more negative voices, however, criticized the show mainly for presenting the homosexual community as being focused primarily on sex, drugs and parties. Such voices (coming also from the gay community) feared that the series would strengthen stereotypes and a negative image of gay people.

A television series dealing exclusively with lesbian lifestyles was launched by Showtime (US) in 2004: *The L Word*. This show portrays the lives of a group of lesbian and bisexual friends in Los Angeles. Some of the main characters are Bette Porter and Tina Kennard, who have been a couple for seven years and not want to have a baby; their next-door neighbor Jenny Schecter, an aspiring writer who falls in love with the seductive Marina Ferrer with whom she cheats on her boyfriend Tim Haspel; the serial heart-breaker and androgynous character Shane McCutcheon; Dana Fairbanks, a professional tennis player, who is scared to 'come out' lest to ruin her career; and Alice Pieszecki, the only bisexual character in this group of friends, who is highly interested in the love and sex lives of all the lesbians in her environment (all activities of which she notes down in a graphic chart). Much like

Queer as Folk, the show became a huge success partially due to its boldness in depicting lesbian lifestyles and sex, apparently without fear of censorship, being everything but prudish. The reactions to this show were controversial as well. Mostly, it was praised for finally focusing on a lesbian community, which is seen to be under-represented on television. On the other hand, it was criticized for focusing almost exclusively on very feminine characters (*femme*) and largely leaving out *butch* (mannish) characters, which was judged to make the show unrepresentative. This fact, however, was also praised because it moves away from stereotypes of lesbian women as being mannish and unattractive. Thus, in a similar way as *Queer as Folk* is equally praised and criticized for its representation of homosexual characters and the potentially resulting cultural impact, *The L Word's* way of representing lesbian women and the possible effects of this representation on society also led to controversial reactions.

The television series *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* focus on previously largely under-represented minorities in more or less differentiated and complex ways, and both are praised and criticized for their depiction of homosexual lives and their potential cultural impacts. Both (or all three) shows are constructed in ways as to challenge certain attitudes, such as homophobia or dichotomous notions of gender. They add to the discussion of sexual self-definition, reject simplified binaries and embrace complex and hybrid forms of gender. They may, however, also have the effect of strengthening certain attitudes and of reinforcing potentially existing prejudices, such as stereotypical views of the idiosyncrasies of a homosexual person, as will be discussed in the following.

Situating the Project

On a larger scale, my project will be part of an academic field called Queer Studies. Queer studies in general offer a study of issues that have to do with (often socially marginal) sexual orientation and gender identity. The term 'queer' is used as an academic move away from more rigid categories, such as 'gay' or 'lesbian', in order to do justice to a more fluid concept of sexual orientation and identity. The term 'queer', as it is used in present-day academics, has become a kind of umbrella term² for all kinds of culturally marginal sexual identities. Queer studies thus deal with a very wide range of issues of sexuality and attempt to question and challenge fixed dichotomies of gender and sexual orientation, such as male/female or heterosexual/homosexual, in order to open the range of thought to a more individualistic and fluid notion of sexuality.

Ever since the 1990s, queer studies and queer theory have experienced a rapid development at universities and in academic discourse. This development has sprung out of various cultural phenomena, such as the homophile movement, gay liberation or lesbian feminism. Various academic fields have influenced as well as been influenced by queer studies since then. Some of the most important ones are literary theory, political studies, history, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Queer studies have, however, not only been restricted to academic research, they

have also included field work, political activism and community involvement which attempts to change society's attitude towards marginalized groups of people, to fight for their rights, and to defeat homophobia. Queer studies have had and will continue to have a double role in describing social phenomena and redefining the social discourse on issues of sexuality.

Within its academic project, the field of queer studies has so far offered various analyses of cultural phenomena such as literary products and movies because of their role within the social discourse on homosexuality. There are also a very small number of articles on television series that are concerned with homosexuality. There has, however, never been a book-length study of specific television series explicitly dealing with homosexuality, such as *Queer as Folk* or *The L Word*. As the aim of my project will be to provide a qualitative product analysis of the kind of discourse on homosexuality as offered by these series, other studies which are yet to be undertaken (such as surveys, investigations into reception or media effect analyses) are offered a basis by my study. The goal of my project is to make visible the values promoted, the ideologies constructed and the methods used to influence the social discourse on homosexuality. The so far only slightly touched upon field of study, namely that of popular forms of entertainment dealing with the subject of queerness, will hopefully play a significant role within the larger project of challenging heterosexism and redefining social discourse on 'deviant' forms of sexuality.

Intended Research Design

As explained before, the television series *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, which deal so explicitly with homosexuality, are expected to have an ideological function in shaping people's attitudes towards homosexuality. In order to detect the norms, values and ideologies displayed in the series, various background aspects must be taken into account such as a general background of homosexuality in such forms of entertainment; the social context in which the series are embedded; the political, cultural, ideological background of the series; collective concerns that may be reflected in the shows; general uses of symbolism and iconography; target groups of the show; background of production or reactions to the show. Moreover, the genre of the given television series must be considered, as every genre has specific methods of narration, motives, formal/stylistic/ideological conventions, specific characters/types, and so on. Thus, while analyzing the material, the genre's influence on the narrative structure as well as on the depiction of characters and their roles must be taken into account.

Apart from such background information, however, the series must be analyzed in detail. Some of the questions leading the analysis of the two shows will therefore be the following: How do the analyzed television series deal with the issue of homosexuality in general? How do they represent homosexual characters? How do they depict homosexual lifestyles? To answer such questions, a thorough analysis will be required to discuss issues such as how a given character is represented and

characterized, how certain issues are dealt with, or how certain ideological statements are brought across. The representation of the events, the characters and the dialogues play a crucial role in how we perceive certain themes related to the general topic of homosexuality. It is therefore important to ask the following: What issues are discussed/depicted in the series and in what way? How do the series, for example, deal with issues such as coming out, discrimination in the work place based on sexual orientation, same-sex marriage, gay adoption, artificial insemination, safe sex, HIV-positive status, drugs, internet pornography, and the like? Moreover, a definition of the world created in the series will become more clear when analyzing what it is set apart from: What role does the 'heterosexual world' play in their fictional worlds? I.e. how do the series represent the heterosexual *other*?

Moreover, a thorough analysis of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* will provide a base to discuss how these specifically 'queer' shows fulfill a function of challenging institutionalized attitudes of society (such as dichotomous notions of gender, homophobia, heterosexism or *compulsory heterosexuality*³), and to raise the question whether they also serve to do the opposite unintentionally (i.e. reinforcing stereotypes). It will be the main goal of this project to test, verify, falsify or put into perspective the following working hypotheses or thesis statements:

1. The analyzed television series depict a world where homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality the deviant *other* (or *abject*) in order to deconstruct society's hetero-normative expectations and question the ideological assumptions behind them.
2. The series use specific methods to challenge certain attitudes of society. For example, they use parody, drag and hybrid-gendered characters to unmask the performativity of gender or bigotry to highlight the absurdity of homophobia.
3. While challenging certain institutionalized attitudes of society, the analyzed series do not succeed in challenging other ways of thinking or possibly even reinforce them (such as certain stereotypes).

In the following three sections, I would like to present a more thorough derivation of the three thesis statements listed above by introducing their theoretical background, and by giving a few examples taken from the three series, which will be abbreviated by QAF-UK, QAF-US and LW. The scenes given from the shows are merely examples to support the hypothesis and to show more practically, how they have come about. They are not yet meant to verify or falsify the assumptions leading the project, as the detailed analysis of the shows has not yet been completed.

Deconstructing the Norm

That, which western society today labels as 'homosexual', is a very modern concept, as argued by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*⁴. Even though sexual acts between people of the same sex may have occurred at all times and places

throughout history, it was modern western society that began to read these acts as a kind of evidence for a particular kind of person – *the homosexual* as a species and a category of human being. A categorization of sexual identity has thus replaced a definition of a sexual practice. What this means within society, how such a person is perceived and what roles are assigned to that individual, all depends on the cultural discourse of the society. In modern times (according to Foucault this shift took place after 1870), homosexual acts have thus become equated with homosexual identities. If we consider ancient Greece where a senator may have occasionally had sex with a younger man, the difference becomes clear. Such acts were not considered to define this man's identity as a homosexual in the same way as it would today. They would have been perceived, interpreted, judged and signified in a different way in accordance with their culture and ideology. According to Michel Foucault, modernity has brought about a whole system of classification, which defines and categorizes forms of sexual behavior and identities. His genealogical history of sexuality exposes the accepted categories of identity, gender and desire as effects of institutions, practices and discourses. As these categories are defined by society, ideology produces a hierarchy favoring certain forms over others, i.e. favoring heterosexuality over any other orientation of desire.

Michel Foucault's argumentation has led to what we now call the social constructionist position seeing gender and identity as fluid entities, which are the product of processes of identification resulting from the interactions of individuals with a society, never seizing to construct and reconstruct identities. Homosexuality, according to this position, is not a fixed concept because same-sex object choice and sex acts have different cultural meanings and different historical contexts in different times and places.

Judith Butler has taken up this social constructionist position and amplified it. According to her understanding of *performativity*⁵, social reality and social identities are not naturally given and fixed entities but continually constructed concepts which are created through language and other forms of social signification (forms of behavior, clothing, etc.). She takes the term 'performativity' from speech act theory, where a performative produces that which it names by referring to accepted norms and codes, which are cited or repeated and thus enacted. Performative speech acts thus call that which they name into existence. In speech act theory, for example, uttering the words "I pronounce you husband and wife" does not only describe reality but, in fact, creates a new reality, if the person uttering the words and the situation and circumstances of that uttering are appropriate. That is, if all necessary social conventions are followed, two people are married by the uttered words. Thus, according to this theory, certain speech acts are performative, as they create (and not only describe) reality. Judith Butler takes this theory a step further by claiming that language generally has the power to create our reality. We enact this reality by continuously repeating and citing conventions, norms of behavior and ideologies. We thereby construct our reality and – through ideology – forget that much of what we consider to be naturally given is, in fact, socially constructed.

In such a way, our gender identities are constructed. Gender is more than merely biological sex, i.e. female or male. It includes all forms of behavior, which are linked to femininity and masculinity. Everything we do, the way we speak, the way we dress, is linked to our gender and to the image other people construct of us. Growing up in a given society, we do not only learn how to behave as a member of that society in general, we also learn what our roles are and what patterns of behavior are linked to these roles. Part of the role we are assigned is defined through our gender, and this part is closely linked to society's expectations of what a specific gender incorporates. These expectations define how a woman, for instance, is to behave, dress, speak, and act. We all grow up in a social environment unconsciously 'learning' such roles by observing our surroundings, through what we are explicitly taught, and by what we learn from experience. We attain our roles as we watch others, as we behave in ways that conflict with social norms and face social sanctions, and as we are rewarded for accepted behavior. According to Butler, gender is one of these roles that we incorporate, rehearse and learn by heart, cite and repeat, and begin to accept as being natural and 'normal'.

Judith Butler stresses gender's constructedness in order to expose the ideology behind our norms and open society to identities that may not fit dichotomous notions of gender or normative heterosexuality. She tries to challenge our norms in order to strengthen the rights of marginalized identities. In present-day western philosophy, an assumed female/male dichotomy and compulsory heterosexuality are still the norm. Even if alternative identities and sexualities may become more and more accepted, they are still caught within a social discourse, which places them outside normality and labels them as deviant. Identities and forms of behavior, which do not fit the accepted norms, are categorized as the *other*, the *object*, the unaccepted. The only way to break through this system is to question the belief that any norm is natural and to deconstruct the construction of our reality, norms, ideals and identities.

Based on the theories of Foucault and Butler introduced so far and adopting the social constructionist position as described above, let me now turn to a more detailed derivation of my first thesis statements. According to Louis Althusser⁶, the way people perceive themselves and others is not innate but acquired within the ideological structures of society. Social practices impose a role on individuals and determine their possibilities and their position within society. Our values and views on certain issues (such as homosexuality) are determined by ideology, which is put into practice through – what he calls – *Ideological State Apparatuses* (ISAs). These include, for example, the family, school, the media, and religions. Through these institutions, subjects not only acquire a system of evaluation, of how to perceive themselves and others, what their role is, how they are expected to behave and how they are to evaluate other forms of behavior, they also make this ideology seem natural and personal. The individuals who were raised in a given society thus 'learn' to have certain opinions while (ideally) being convinced that they have come to these opinions without society's influence and on their own terms. The way these

ISAs work is through the kind of power Michel Foucault describes as a productive (rather than repressive) power⁷, which covertly works on people to naturalize certain ideas that come from society, are part of its ideology and become the individual's personal views. A society's belief system – which manifests itself in any form of discourse – becomes powerful as the individuals of the society accept its ideas as their own views or common sense. Social discourse in general and Althusser's ISAs in particular thus determine what the people in a given society consider as normal or as deviant, respectively. As a popular form of entertainment and a very widespread part of the media, television series can be counted to Althusser's ISAs and are thus expected to play a role in influencing society's discourse on homosexuality. They thereby potentially have a political and ideological function in shaping society's general attitude towards homosexuality and homosexual individuals. The focus of this analysis will be on television series for precisely that reason. If the media and any form of entertainment influence society with the ideology they construct and the values they normalize, and if more and more television series (as well as movies and comic strips and other forms of entertainment) deal with homosexuality explicitly, these products deserve closer examination.

As television series which focus mainly on homosexual communities and lifestyles adopt a clearly pro-homosexual stance and are – as a popular form of entertainment – produced for a target group which is much larger and more heterogeneous than, say, pornography would be, their effect on larger society is expected to be considerable. One of these potential effects can be explained by introducing Derrida's theory of *deconstruction*⁸. The main target of deconstruction is phallogocentrism and its main criticism is on the binary oppositions (and violent hierarchies) on which this phallogocentrism is based, such as – in our case – male over female or heterosexual over homosexual. Deconstructing any text or discourse means making visible the values, concepts and ideas at the core of its construction, and thereby questioning the validity of the 'truths' that are taken for granted. The steps which are necessary for this kind of deconstruction are the following: First, the binary oppositions which are taken for granted are to be identified, then, the hierarchy of these two concepts must be inverted, privileging the traditionally subordinated category, thereby unmasking the assumptions behind the belief system, and finally, new concepts outside of dichotomous thought must be found. My first thesis is that exactly these steps are taken in my primary material – de facto, not scientifically intended, of course – as they discuss the binary opposition of homosexual vs heterosexual and invert the hierarchy of the two by privileging homosexual over heterosexual. The analyzed television series thus depict a world where homosexuality is the norm and heterosexuality the deviant *other* (or *abject*) in order to deconstruct society's hetero-normative expectations and to question the ideological assumptions behind them. Hence, even though a television series is not a scientific medium deconstructing a form of discourse, these shows nevertheless achieve a deconstructive effect by their constitution.

The most important binary opposition structuring the worlds of fiction depicted in both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* is the opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality. As mentioned before, the hierarchy of the two is reversed, as the majority of the characters in both shows are homosexual in orientation. Even though these characters work in environments with mainly heterosexual colleagues or clients, the focus of the series lies on these characters interaction with each other. The main part of the action displayed in the episodes of both shows takes place in the homes of the main characters, or bars and clubs where mostly homosexual people meet, such as “The Planet” in *The L Word* which is not exclusively a lesbian bar, but has various special nights for lesbians, and which is the main meeting point for the primarily lesbian circle of friends whose stories are told in the show. In both versions of *Queer as Folk*, the majority of the scenes are set in such spaces where people are primarily homosexual, such as the gay scene area around Canal Street. Hence, in these worlds homosexuality is the ‘norm’. Even though both shows feature heterosexual characters, these characters are either used to comment on homophobia and bigotry – as will be discussed in the next section of this paper – or they are somehow part of the community but seem to function as outsiders, as the *others*, as those who do not quite fit in. In *The L Word*, such characters are Jenny and Tim, a couple living next door to Tina and Bette. When Jenny first moves to Los Angeles, she seems rather uncomfortable with her lesbian neighbors and their friends. Even though she always thought of herself as being open-minded, she soon discovers how disturbing and confusing this new world becomes for her. So confusing, in fact, that she loses any sense of stability in her own sexual orientation, cheats on her boyfriend with a woman, and – in a longer process presented in the first two seasons of the show – beings to identify herself as a lesbian. Finally secure in her position, she even decides to make a statement about her new identity by cutting her hair. Her conversation with a straight man called Mark leads to this decision:

- MARK: Are you gay?
 JENNY: *[shrugs]* No. I don’t know. What do you think?
 MARK: If I saw you at a bar, I would assume you are straight.
[... The conversation goes on about how he recognizes other women to be lesbians ...]
 MARK: I don’t know. I’d say it has something to do with their attitude. It’s not that they’re masculine, or anything, ‘cause actually some of them are pretty feminine. You know? It’s ... they have these ... haircuts. These very cool haircuts – don’t get me wrong – it’s not – more – it’s obviously more than a haircut. But it’s - no, it’s true. It’s this ... something that they exude that’s ... I’m gonna try and put my finger on it.
*[from: LW 204]*⁹

Before Jenny moved to Los Angeles, she did not doubt her identity or her sexuality. Now that her world has changed so much, she wants to show this to the world.

With her new identity as a lesbian woman and with her new look after cutting her hair, she now belongs to the 'lesbian community' depicted in the show and is no longer an outsider.

Another character who seems to stick out of the group in the beginning – even though she is already part of the lesbian circle of friends – is Alice who calls herself a bisexual. In the pilot of the show, a girl comments on her status as a bisexual woman by saying: “Okay, Alice makes the team, but just barely” In another instance, Alice’s friend Dana comments on the fact as well and makes fun of her for being ‘in between’:

DANA: Oh, Christ, Alice! When are you gonna make up your mind between dick and pussy, and spare us the gory bisexual details, please.

ALICE: Well, for your information, Dana, I am looking for the same qualities in a man as I am in a woman.

DANA: *[gesturing to Tina]* Big tits!

[from: LW 101]

Later on in the show, Alice and Dana fall in love with each other and Alice gives up men. As these two examples show, the world created in *The L Word* has one standard sexual orientation, and that is homosexual. Those who are not, stick out of the group, do not really belong anywhere and struggle to find their place in a world where something different from them is the norm. *The L Word* thus turns around society’s hetero-normative expectations into a fictional society with a homosexual norm.

In *Queer as Folk*, the same effect is created. The majority of the characters are homosexual and those who are not – and are not the homophobic bigots discussed in the next session – are somehow part of the group, but only to a certain extent. The most obvious example is Debbie Novotny, Michaels mother, in the US-version of the show. Being a very extroverted character always willing to fight for the rights of minorities, and having a homosexual son as well as a homosexual and HIV-positive brother, she has increasingly become part of a gay community without ever being homosexual. She even seems more eager to fight for homosexuals and march at Pride Parade¹⁰ than her own son who prefers to stay in the closet. As long as she is a member of her son’s circle of friends and only interacts with homosexual people, her world seems to be intact. In the second season of the show, however, a policeman asks Debbie out on a date. It is this instance that shatters her life. All of the sudden, she finds herself torn between two worlds, two ideologies, two value systems and sets of norms. This situation even leads to a fight with her son:

MICHAEL: She hit me. My mother fucking hit me!

TED: She’s always hitting you.

BRIAN: That’s how she shows her affection.

MICHAEL: I mean for real.

BRIAN: Well, what did Mikey do?
 MICHAEL: I told her she was pathetic for dating that fucking cop.
 TED: You know, if she keeps this up, we're going to have to take her honorary queer button away.
 MICHAEL: Where are her values? Her principles?
 BRIAN: You know how it is when you want cock, they're the first things to go.

[from: QAF-US 214]

Fortunately, the fight soon resolves and Debbie finds a way to deal with the situation. The initial conflict shows, however, that the world of fiction depicted in *Queer as Folk* is a homosexually oriented world and deviating from that norm is just as difficult as deviating from any norm in any society.

Apart from turning around the hierarchy of the binary oppositions of homosexuality and heterosexuality, the shows also have a deconstructive effect in their use of certain swear words often used to insult homosexuals. In his very eloquent coming-out speech to his parents, Stuart (QAF-UK) turns around the effect and connotation of anti-gay terms by re-appropriating their use to empower (instead of diminish) himself and strengthen his own position:

STUART: We don't do hammers, or nails, or saws. We do joints and screws, but that's different.
 MOTHER: Who does?
 STUART: Queers. Because I'm queer. I'm gay. I'm homosexual. I'm a poof, I'm a poofier, I'm a ponce. I'm a bumboy, battyboy, backside artist, bugger, I'm bent. I am that arse bandit. I lift those shirts. I'm a faggot-ass, fudge-packing, shit-stabbing uphill gardener. I dine at the downstairs restaurant, I dance at the other end of the ballroom. I'm Moses and the parting of the red cheeks. I fuck and am fucked. I suck and am sucked. I rim them and wank them, and every single man's had the fucking time of his life. And I am not a pervert. If there's one twisted bastard in this family, it's this little blackmailer here. So congratulations, Thomas. I've just officially outed you. Oh and one more thing: did I mention I've got a baby?

[from: QAF-UK 201]

Not only does he use these insults in a proud and confident way, he also turns around the whole process of coming out to an outing of his nephew Thomas as a homophobe and a blackmailer. He turns around the discourse of the situation and thereby questions not only the expected behavior of a homosexual person when coming out – i.e. as sorry and miserable and bad – but also the regular use and negative connotations of the words used for homosexual people. What he does in this speech, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* do in a larger social discourse. They decon-

struct our hetero-normative expectations and thereby question the naturalness of our norms and standards.

Unmasking Performativity

Apart from this deconstructive effect, the series employ other strategies as well to challenge certain ideological views of present-day western society. One of the methods that can be detected is the use of parody. According to Judith Butler¹¹, drag, by imitating gender in an exaggerated way, reveals the performativity and unmasks the constructedness of gender itself. Lober describes the effect of drag in the following way: “The joke in drag is to set up ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’ as pure performance, as exaggerated gender display.”¹² Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque¹³ is a set of strategies to parody the official culture of a society through images, thereby becoming a form of counter-culture, questioning prevailing ideologies. The liberating potential of the carnival (or, for instance, of a pride parade) lies in the fact that the official belief system can be ridiculed, exaggerated and thereby questioned. This liberating effect can best be exemplified by the following scene, which takes place at Pride Parade¹⁴. Michael, who is still in the closet where his work colleagues are concerned, sees some of these colleagues who always make fun of homosexuals in front of him (unaware of his sexual orientation, however) at the parade. So far, he has never been able to stand up to them and tell them their jokes are hurting people. At this point, however, he is his own surroundings where they are the others, and he is disguised as a woman:

MICHAEL: *[He is dressed as a woman and only Tracy recognizes him. The colleagues try not to laugh when he approaches them.]* Hi ya boys! So which one of you is a real man?

MAN 1: We all are.

ANDREW: What about you?

MICHAEL: You tell me. *[He gives Andrew a kiss on his lips while his colleagues laugh. Andrew is in shock. Michael turns around with a smile and leaves.]* See you, lover boy.

[from: QAF-UK 108]

In this moment, Michael has the power to turn the game around, make fun of them for a change and challenge the ruling ideology. Of course, one must bear in mind that a carnival, a parade or even a television show on a queer world are all forms of an outlet for subcultures which are controlled by a supervising official culture allowing them to manifest to a limited extent – this reciprocity is included in Bakhtin’s concept.

Apart from this use of drag to challenge official ideology, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* also use hybrid-gendered characters to highlight the performativity of gender and deconstruct the naturalness of forms of behavior based on gender. The three main characters playing with the notions of masculinity and femininity are

Shane (LW), Stuart (QAF-UK) and Brian (QAF-US). As Johnson states: «Most significantly, Stuart exists in a conflicted space: his persona is simultaneously feminized and masculinized. [...] His performance rejects the familiar feminine-masculine binary, combining elements of oppositional gendered behavior into something new and dynamic.»¹⁵ The same can be said about the other two characters, Stuart's American equivalent Brian, and the lesbian character Shane, whose boss Veronica once comments upon in the following quote:

VERONICA: *[To Shane who is wearing a blazer over a t-shirt and carries an old army-bag.]* What are you dressed like? Are you the poster child for the under-nourished and gender-confused?

[from: LW 204]

Her friend Dana makes a similar remark about the way she is dressed:

DANA: You know, do you have to dress like that all the time?

SHANE: *[looks down at her clothing]* Like what?

DANA: Well, I wouldn't be seen on the street with you.

SHANE: Yeah?

DANA: I mean, every single thing about the way you're dressed, like, screams dyke.

[from: LW 101/2]

Veronica calls Shane's way to dress 'gender-confused', Dana states that it 'screams dyke'. However you call it, by dressing this way she refuses to follow society's expectations of femininity. Moreover, she refuses to be restricted in what she can and cannot do as a woman. As she states in the following scene, there is only one thing a man can do and she cannot, and that is urinated while standing:

ALICE: You only get it for 24 hours, and then it disappears. What do you do with that penis for 24 hours?

SHANE: I would pee standing up on every bush I could find.

DANA: That's all you would do, you would just ... just pee.

SHANE: *[nods]* Mm-hmm. Yup.

JENNY: You really wouldn't try to fuck a lot of girls?

SHANE: *[smiling]* I don't need a dick to do that.

[from: LW 204]

Apart from these characters, which are all located somewhere in between masculinity and femininity and refuse to let society restrict their actions and possibilities in any way, the two television shows feature a number of clearly hybrid characters, both in terms of their gender and of their sexual orientation. In *The L Word*,

for example, Alice starts dating Lisa who is a lesbian-identified man. Unfortunately, bisexual Alice and lesbian (but male) Lisa do not work out after all, as Alice finally breaks up with Lisa with the following explanation:

ALICE: You know what, Lisa? When I first started seeing you, I wanted something simple and easy. And instead I end up with the most complicated interpretation of sexual identity I've ever encountered. You know, I mean, you do lesbian better than any lesbian I know! Okay. And I don't want a lesbian boyfriend. I'm sorry! I want a boyfriend who's straight, or I want a lesbian who's a girl!

[from: LW 110]

The same fate awaits Kit (Bette's heterosexual sister) and the drag-king she begins to date, when Kit sees her 'boyfriend' naked and finally realizes that he really is a she in biological terms. Even though Kit knew this from the start, she simply did not know from the beginning how she would react to being disillusioned.

Drag kings and queens, masculine gay men and camp gay men, feminine lesbians and butches, and even lesbian-identified men – *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* discuss in every detail and exemplify with fascinating characters what the performativity of gender and sexual orientation truly means and thereby unmask the naturalness of femininity and masculinity as social constructs.

As announced above, the series use specific methods to challenge certain attitudes of society. For example, they use parody, drag and hybrid-gendered characters to unmask the performativity of gender. Another method deployed is the use of bigotry to reflect upon dominant culture and its narrow-minded attitudes (such as homophobia). By burlesque bigot characters, the series comment on the rigidity of homophobic fears and hetero-normative expectations. Hence, the television shows use bigotry to highlight the absurdity of homophobia.

As mentioned before, various heterosexual characters appearing in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* function as bigot counter-characters and are used to discuss the violent and horrific effects of homophobia. One of these characters is Christian Hobbs, a schoolmate of Nathan's, who is described as follows:

NATHAN: And Christian Hobbs, do you know what he does? He finds a boy, and if that boy is a bit quiet, if he's a bit different, Christian Hobbs kicks his head in. He kicks him and calls him queer. That boy there, he beats us up 'cause we're queer. Plenty more I could have said, Christian, and that's a favor.

[from: QAF-UK 108]

The same character also appears in the American version of *Queer as Folk* where Justin, Nathan's equivalent, tries to take away Chris' power by outing him as a homophobe instead:

JUSTIN: What are you doing here?
CHRIS: Checking out the freaks. Like you.
JUSTIN: Down here you're the freak.
CHRIS: *[pushing Justin aside]* Out of the way, faggot.
JUSTIN: *[Screaming out to the mainly homosexual people around.]* Hey! Hey! You guys see him? We go to school together. His name is Chris Hobbs. He just called me a faggot. You see, Chris doesn't like faggots.
CHRIS: Shut up, Taylor.
JUSTIN: Or maybe he likes them more than he thinks.
CHRIS: I said shut up!
JUSTIN: He let me jerk him off! *[Crowd starts laughing.]* The faggot gave Chris Hobbs a hand-job! He loved it.
CHRIS: You are fucked!
[...]
BRIAN: Congratulations.
JUSTIN: What?
BRIAN: You just made yourself a real enemy.

[from: QAF-US 116]

Unfortunately, Brian turns out to be right with his comment, as Chris eventually puts Justin to a coma by repeatedly beating him with a baseball bat. Instead of blaming homophobia, however, Justin's mother blames her son's sexual orientation:

JENNIFER: The day they sent him home from the hospital, the doctor said he'd never seen such a determined patient, and then he asked what it was that made him work so hard. I knew but I didn't tell him – it was you. Every day that you didn't come to see him was more incentive for him to get better so he could get out and he come and see you. Of course, what Justin didn't know, and I didn't tell him, was that you were there, every night. The nurse on duty told me. I want to thank you for that. But he's home now, safe and sound, and there isn't any reason anymore for you to watch over him, so I would like you to leave. And never see him again.
BRIAN: I care about him.
JENNIFER: It was because of you, he was almost killed. – Forgive me for being so blunt. I've tried to accept him for who he is. To accept your world and his part of it. I've even tried to accept you. And as a result, I nearly lost him. And I don't intend to lose him again. And so, if you really care about him, and I believe you do, you'll do what I ask, and return my son to me.

[from: QAF-US 201]

Later on, however, Jennifer realizes that in order to recover, Justin needs his friends who support and accept him the way he is. Her initial reaction is to wish her son were 'normal' or at least back in the closet. She wants him to surrender to society's expectations of him and give up everything he may want personally. As Brian states later on at the Pride Parade, however, this reaction would mean the victory of homophobia:

JUSTIN: I told you, I didn't want to come here!
BRIAN: Well, you're here. And you're queer. So enjoy!
JUSTIN: It's just a big freak show!
BRIAN: Oh, did you think you were going to find pride at the parade?
JUSTIN: So what the fuck are we doing here?
BRIAN: I'm just making sure Chris Hobbes doesn't win.
[from: QAF-US 204]

Simply giving up empowers homophobia and furthers a negative discourse on homosexuality. Just as *Queer as Folk* refuses to be silenced, so do its characters. Another instance exemplifying the violence of homophobia is Brian's coming out to his father, who would rather see him dead than gay:

BRIAN: I'm gay.
JACK: *[He is startled. Turns around slowly.]* Well, you picked a hell of a fucking time to tell me you're a fairy. As if I don't have enough to deal with. Jesus. You're the one that should be dying, instead of me.
BRIAN: *[Punching a box]* But I'm not dying, you selfish old prick. You are.
[from: QAF-US 115]

Justin's father reacts badly to his son's coming out as well. Not only does he want to send his son away, he also uses violence to express his disappointment and anger:

CRAIG: We're sending you away to school. It's time you learned some discipline. How to be a man.
JUSTIN: *[smiles]* I know all about discipline. And you should see me take it like a man. *[Craig slaps Justin]*
JENNIFER: *[gasps]* Craig! *[She goes to Justin.]*
JUSTIN: It's all right, mom. It didn't hurt. If you want to hit me, go right ahead. Only I'm not gonna cry like some little faggot. And if you want to send me away, that's all right, too. 'Cause I bet more butt-fucking goes on in boarding school than in the back room of Babylon. But whatever you do, it's not gonna matter... 'cause I'll still be your queer son.
[from: QAF-US 107]

In the episode following this scene, he throws his son out of his house for good:

- CRAIG: *[to Justin]* I'm gonna say this. If your gonna live in this house there rules you have to obey. You are not to go to gay bars or talk about your disgusting lifestyle. And you are never, ever to see him again. *[referring to Brian]*
- BRIAN: So, in other words, for Justin to live here with you, he has to deny who he is, what he thinks, and how he feels.
- CRAIG: I don't ask for your opinion, pal.
- BRIAN: *[gets up]* Well, that's not love. That's hate.
- CRAIG: Get the fuck out of my house!
- BRIAN: Justin, are you coming? *[Justin's shocked and looks at his mom who looks helpless. Without a word, he follows Brian out of the house.]*
[from: QAF-US 108]

The characters of Chris Hobbs and Craig Taylor are designed to function as bad examples. They are cruel and violent and they stand for everything homophobia brings with it. Unable to understand Justin or any homosexual person, they attempt to destroy what scares them instead of trying to deal with it. Scenes like these clearly underline the show's anti-homophobic stance and promote an attitude of acceptance and open-mindedness. They promote the attitude expressed by Ted trying to stop Emmett from hating himself for being gay and joining a religious group founded to help homosexuals find their path back to heterosexuality:

- TED: Because he created you in His image. At least, that's what I was always taught. And since God is love, and God doesn't make any mistakes, then you must be exactly the way He wants you to be. The way He intended you to be. That goes for every person, every planet, every mountain, every grain of sand, every song. Every tear. And every faggot. We're all His, Emmett. He loves us all.
[from: QAF-US 114]

The examples given so far highlight the potentially violent effects of homophobia. The following scene, however, stresses the absurdity of homophobic prejudices. When Lindsay's sister is getting married, she asks her and her partner Melanie to each bring male dates and pretend they are heterosexual couples:

- LINDSAY: Look, I'm sorry to make you pretend to be our dates. But my sister insisted that Mel and I not draw attention to ourselves.
- MELANIE: What, did she think we were going to perform cunnilingus on top of the wedding cake?
[from: QAF-US 201]

Melanie's joke about performing oral sex in public clearly makes fun of the kind of stereotypes and prejudices some people may have of homosexuals, draws attention to the absurdity of homophobia and challenges society's value system when fitting in becomes more important than love, family and honesty.

Certainly, the use of deconstruction and the instances of parody or bigotry are not the only forms of subversion to received notions of gender and sexuality essentialism, and not the only methods deployed in the television series to challenge official ideology. They are, however, some of the most prominent ones. Other causes for a challenging effect will certainly crystallize while analyzing the material in detail.

Dangers of Representation

Despite these effects of the discussed television shows, it can be assumed that challenging certain attitudes of society is not the only impact they have. As an Ideological State Apparatus¹⁶, a popular form of entertainment shapes opinions, values and world-views. As such, these television shows play a role in shaping society's views on the characters and issues they depict. Dealing rather exclusively with issues related to homosexuality and displaying explicitly homosexual characters, the image they present of homosexuality has an impact on what we consider as being 'homosexual', how we perceive homosexual characters and what kinds of behavior we expect from homosexual people. If then a television series that deals with homosexuality focuses on sex, drugs and alcohol, it is exactly that image viewers gain of homosexual lifestyles. If, in addition, most of the characters are depicted as flat, with very little depth, and their superficiality and concentration on shallow activities is emphasized, the series run the risk of presenting a commodified and clichéd style of living, hinting at a stereotypical uniformity of the depicted subculture. This assumption (and the fact that the analyzed series have been criticized for their lack of representativeness) leads me to my last conjecture: While challenging certain institutionalized attitudes of society, the analyzed series do not succeed in challenging other ways of thinking or even reinforce them (such as certain stereotypes).

The most prominent issues criticized about *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* is that the fictional characters presented in them are not representative of homosexual people and their lifestyles in reality. The lesbians portrayed in *The L Word* are, for example, mostly *femme* – i.e. very feminine characters. The most *butch* lesbian is probably Shane, who may be a somewhat ambiguous, but certainly not a thoroughly masculine character. Hence, even though lesbian women are finally the stars of a show and not merely the side characters adding to general amusement, numerous lesbian women may still not feel represented in this particular show. Certainly, the circumstance that most of the main characters of the show are beautiful and sexy to lesbian women as well as to heterosexual men (namely by being *femme*) has to do with the assumption that *The L Word* is a television show trying to reach as many viewers as possible. The series does not only have to be interesting and watch-worthy to a wider range of people, it also has to provide people with

a kind of fantasy world by means of which they can escape from reality. For this reason, the characters are successful in their jobs and beautiful to most. The viewers can imagine to be a certain character or to be *with* one of them. At the same time, however, they also have to be able to identify with the characters as they fail, succeed, suffer and fall in love. The fictional characters have to be realistic, for sure, but nevertheless better than real life.

Apart from the lack of representativeness – which can probably be said about both shows – it is mostly the stereotypes promoted in them, which can be criticized. In *Queer as Folk*, we are told from the beginning that it is all about sex. Alderson states that the show “unapologetically presented sexual pursuit – often fuelled with drink and drugs – as the *raison d’être* of that scene, rejecting the prescriptions of a sanitizing ‘positive image’ agenda.”¹⁷ In the very first episodes, we see the characters have several meaningless sexual encounters, do drugs, party all night long and focus on superficial appearances only. Is that the kind of picture we are to have of homosexual people? Nowadays, it is not only these shows that focus so much on sex – *Sex and the City*, for example, is all about sex as well. The difference is, however, that we have seen women in countless forms and with all kinds of aspects of their lives highlighted on television – *Sex and the City* is then only one other aspect of their lives. With *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, however, we have groundbreaking new forms of entertainment focusing on a so far underrepresented group of people. The image they provide is thus, for the moment, one of the very few pictures we get of homosexuality. Is it then the task of these shows to be representative of all homosexual people and forms of life, even though these are just as various and individual as those of anybody else? This difficult question is discussed in a humorous way in QAF-US, as the characters argue about the quality of *Gay as Blazes*, an imagined politically correct television show about homosexual characters:

- LINDSAY: The Times says that’s it the most accurate portrayal of gay life ever shown on television.
- BRIAN: Well, then, where’s the sucking? And where’s the fucking?
- MELANIE: Jesus, don’t you get enough of that at home?
- MICHAEL: The whole point on GaB is that it’s not all about sex. There’s more to gay life than that.
- BRIAN: Like reading Sylvia Plath. I’d sooner kill myself.
- TED: These people have principles. When you have principles, you don’t need orgasms.
- BRIAN: You have principles when you don’t have orgasms.
- LINDSAY: I, for one, commend the producers for portraying us as being mature and responsible.
- MELANIE: Instead of being promiscuous and narcissistic.
- BRIAN: Welcome to Fantasy Island.

[from: QAF-US 203]